

# THE FOREBEARS OF H.M.S. 'SULTAN'

BY

ENGINEER LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER (L) J. M. MABER, R.N.

The name *Sultan* for one of H.M. ships dates from the time of George III, but there is no record of the reason for the choice which was given to a third rate 74-gun ship of the line ordered to be built by William Barnard of Harwich in 1771. Warship construction in peacetime was, however, a slow business partly for financial reasons, but also to allow the structure to weather before being put afloat. Thus, it was not until December 1775 that the *Sultan* was launched on the waters of the Orwell. By this time, Britain's American colonists were in revolt but, in the absence of any interest by the other great powers, there was little maritime activity and the newly launched *Sultan* was laid up 'in ordinary' to await any requirement for her service with the fleet.

Following the American Declaration of Independence, the rebellion escalated into a full scale war and in August 1777 the *Sultan* was docked at Chatham to prepare for service. She commissioned on the 1st November 1777 under the command of Captain John Wheelock and on the 17th March 1778 moved down to the Nore with her ship's company still lacking many of the six hundred authorized as the complement of a third rate man-of-war.

The *Sultan* joined the fleet, commanded by Admiral the Hon. Augustus Keppel, at Spithead on the 8th April and some four weeks later was present when the flagship *Prince George* was visited by the King. The ceremonial over, the *Sultan* sailed for Plymouth there to join a squadron assembling for service in North American waters under Rear-Admiral the Hon. John Byron. The squadron left Plymouth on the 9th June 1778 and reached New York some eight weeks later after a stormy passage during which several of the ships suffered

considerable damage. Thereafter some weeks were spent refitting and making good weather damage and it was October 1778 before the squadron was again ready for sea.

After the British reverse at Saratoga in October 1777, the French had signed a treaty of alliance with the infant United States and, in February 1778, had entered the war, thus precipitating a struggle for world-wide maritime supremacy. Much of the action that followed was centred in and around the West Indies and it was there that the *Sultan* first saw action against the French who, on that occasion, were under the command of the Comte d'Estaing.

Early in July 1779 Admiral Byron, having learned of the French occupation of Georgetown, Grenada, left St. Kitts with twenty-one ships of the line and a convoy of transports with the object of restoring the British position in the island. The French were sighted early on the 6th July and, although unaware of the strength of the enemy force, Byron ordered a 'general chase' as the French struggled out to sea in the face of the prevailing easterly wind. In the event, the French managed to form their fleet into line so that the first two British ships engaged, the *Prince of Wales* (Rear-Admiral Samuel Barrington) and *Sultan* (Captain Alan Gardner), were subjected from the outset to the concentrated fire of the French battle line and thus sustained considerable damage.

Other vessels of the British fleet likewise engaged the enemy in ones and twos, but the over-hasty piecemeal attack failed to achieve its objective of breaking the French line. During the course of the forenoon, Byron, in an attempt to retrieve the situation, ordered his own leading ships to form into line, but the action moved away to the northward into the path of the unprotected troop convoy. At this moment, prompt action by the *Monmouth* narrowly averted disaster by distracting the attention of the leading French vessels, and as the afternoon wore on the opposing fleets drifted apart and the engagement came to an indecisive end with little hope on the part of the British of any tangible success.

The *Sultan*, considerably damaged and with seventeen killed and forty-three wounded, came to anchor with the fleet on the 15th July in Basseterre Roads, St. Kitts, where the wounded were landed and damage repairs put in hand. Apart from some minor skirmishing early in 1780, the *Sultan* saw no further action in the West Indies and, towards the end of October 1780, returned to Spithead where she paid off prior to docking for a much needed refit.

The *Sultan* recommissioned in May 1781, under Captain James Watt, for service in the East Indies with the squadron commanded by Vice-Admiral Sir Edward Hughes. There, in the space of fifteen months, the *Sultan* was involved in four of the five hard-fought but indecisive actions between Hughes and a French squadron under the command of the Bailli de Suffren. On the 12th April 1782 off Providien, she sustained widespread minor damage but few casualties; three months later at Negapatam, however, the *Sultan* suffered much more severe damage as the result of ninety-three shots into her hull and upperworks: sixteen of her ship's company were killed and twenty-one wounded.

The *Sultan* was quickly repaired and in the third action, off Trincomalee in September 1782, suffered but little damage although, unfortunately, Captain Watt lost an arm and subsequently died as a result of his injuries. In the final engagement of the series, off Cuddalore in June 1783, the *Sultan*, now commanded by Captain Andrew Mitchell, was hit twenty-two times but damage was not serious and casualties amounted to no more than nine wounded. This last abortive action brought about the British withdrawal from Madras. However, negotiations seeking peace were already under way and the signing in September 1783 of the Treaty of Versailles ended the war: the independence of the United States was recognised by Britain and a welcome pause in the long drawn out struggle with France ensued. Towards the end of 1784, the *Sultan*, now under the command of Thomas Troubridge and wearing Hughes' flag,

returned home via St. Helena to Spithead. On the 31st May 1785 she paid off at Portsmouth, the days of her active employment at sea at an end.

Thereafter, the old ship was employed as an accommodation hulk for convalescent seamen until, with the renewal of hostilities in 1793, she was turned over to duty as a prison hulk for French captives. Renamed *Suffolk* in October 1805 to make way for a new *Sultan*, the ship lay in Portchester lake fulfilling this distasteful role until, the war over, she was finally sold for breaking up at Portsmouth in January 1816.

### The Second 'Sultan'

The second ship of the name, like her forebear a 74-gun third rate, was launched by Dodman & Co. at Deptford on the 19th September 1807 and was commissioned, under the command of Captain Edward Griffith, on the 14th October in that year. On completion of fitting out, the new *Sultan* was despatched to the Mediterranean there to join Lord Collingwood's fleet blockading Toulon.

As ever, close blockade was monotonous work and damaging to both material and morale. However, on the 26th April 1809 during the unavoidable absence of part of the blockading squadron, a French force of five of the line, two frigates and several smaller vessels, under the command of Rear-Admiral Baudin in the 80-gun *Robuste*, slipped out of Toulon with troops and stores for the relief of the besieged garrison in Barcelona. With its objective achieved, the French returned successfully to Toulon and the blockade was resumed. Throughout succeeding months, the French fleet lay at anchor in Toulon roads awaiting a second opportunity to relieve the Barcelona garrison. Lord Collingwood soon received information, however, of French intentions and withdrew the fleet to a station between San Sebastian and Barcelona leaving his frigates to watch for any move on the part of the enemy.

On the 21st October, Rear-Admiral Baudin, again with his flag in the *Robuste* and accompanied by the *Borée*, *Lion*, two frigates and a convoy of troop-transports and armed store-ships, left Toulon bound for Barcelona. News of the French move reached Lord Collingwood via the frigate *Pomone* and contact was made during the forenoon of the 23rd October, when Rear-Admiral Martin with eight of the fastest ships of the line was ordered to give chase. It was 0700 on the 25th October before Martin's squadron, now reduced to six but including the *Sultan*, came up with the French nearing Sète. At 1145, the *Robuste* and *Lion*, caught on a shallow lee shore, put their helms up and drove ashore. Finding it impossible to save his ships, Baudin sent the ships' companies on shore and fired the wrecks both of which blew up at about 2230. The British squadron stood off and watched this self-immolation and afterwards rejoined Collingwood's fleet cruising off Cape San Sebastian.

Captain John West assumed command of the *Sultan* on the 19th December 1809 and for the next eighteen months the Mediterranean battle fleet exercised control of the sea lanes from Gibraltar to Alexandria with seldom any sight of the enemy whose main fleet remained 'in being' in Toulon. Early in the morning of the 19th July 1811, however, Sir Edward Pellew despatched the inshore division, comprising the battleships *Sultan* and *Conqueror*, to give chase to the French 40-gun frigates *Amélie* and *Adrienne* which were attempting to reach Toulon from Genoa. The French fleet, under Vice-Admiral Emerian, weighed and sailed to cover the approach of the frigates, and towards noon, the *Sultan* and *Conqueror* exchanged distant broadsides with the French advanced squadron. Minor damage was inflicted on the enemy, but the frigates made Toulon in safety.

The *Sultan* returned home towards the end of 1812 and, after refitting, joined the Channel Fleet. She saw no further action, however, and on the 18th March 1815 paid off into reserve at Portsmouth. Thereafter she lay 'in ordinary',

her armament and stores landed and her masts taken out, for another forty-three years until 1858 when she was declared 'non-effective' and reclassified as a receiving hulk. The *Sultan* served in this last menial role for some five years until she was sold for breaking up in January 1864, having been included in the Navy List for fifty-seven years of which only seven had been spent in active employment at sea!

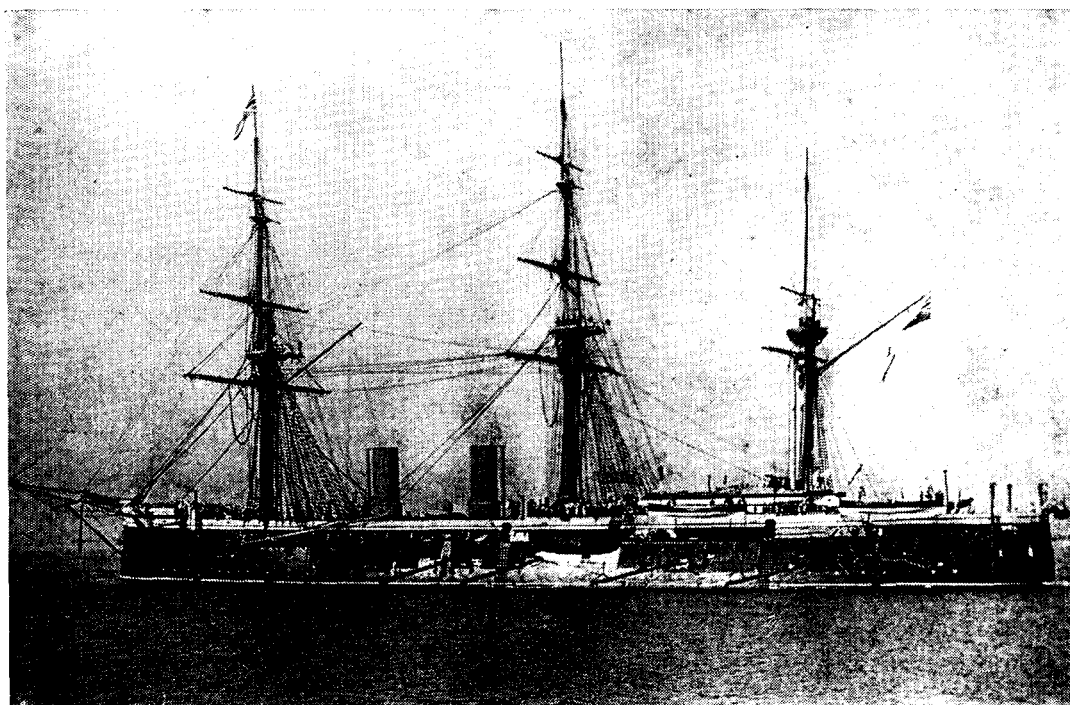


FIG. 2—THE THIRD 'SULTAN' IN 1888 SHOWING HER FUNNELS RAISED  
Reproduced by permission of the National Maritime Museum, London

### The Third 'Sultan'

The name *Sultan* was next bestowed on an ironclad battleship, laid down as *Triumph* at Chatham on the 29th February 1868, but subsequently renamed in honour of Sultan Azizieh of Turkey who visited England with all the pomp of a state occasion while the vessel was under construction in 1869. Designed by Sir Edward Reed, she was the last of the central battery ironclads which represented the compromise between the early broadside ironclad developments of the wooden ship of the line and masted turret-ships such as the *Monarch*, *Temeraire* and the ill-fated *Captain*. The new *Sultan* was floated out of the dock in which she had been built on the 31st May 1870 and thereafter was fitted out with her armament comprising eight 10-inch muzzle-loading rifles, four 9-inch MLR and seven 20-pounder breech-loading guns.

The two-bladed single screw was driven by a twin-cylinder horizontal trunk-engine built by John Penn & Co. of Greenwich, steam at 30 p.s.i. being supplied by six tank-boilers. Her best speed under steam was some 14 knots, but she was provided also with a full three-masted ship rig (reduced to a barque rig in 1876) which enabled her to sail, with a fair breeze and the screw raised, at about 12 knots. Ironclads of the Victorian navy were expected to proceed under sail whenever there was sufficient wind, and indeed the great majority of commanding officers spurned the use of steam machinery with its attendant smoke and grime. 'Spit and polish' with snow-white holystoned decks and immaculate paintwork were the contemporary hall-marks of an efficient ship!

The *Sultan*, under the command of Captain E. W. Vansittart, R.N., commissioned for service with the Channel Fleet on the 12th September 1871 and,

for the next four years, took part in the annual round of exercises and 'showing the flag' visits to home and continental ports. Subsequently refitted, she re-commissioned on the 25th February 1876, with Captain H.R.H. the Duke of Edinburgh in command, destined for service in the Mediterranean.

On the 13th February 1878, the *Sultan* was one of Vice-Admiral Sir Geoffrey P. Hornby's squadron which was sent through the Dardenelles to the Sea of Marmora as a demonstration in support of the Sultan of Turkey, whose country was involved once again in war with Russia. The British government was anxious to maintain the *status quo* in the eastern Mediterranean and to this end had already occupied, with the tacit consent of the Turkish government, the island of Cyprus. This task apart, however, the *Sultan's* commission proved uneventful and she returned to Portsmouth to pay off on the 14th June 1878.

A lengthy refit followed in the course of which the *Sultan* was given protection against torpedo-boat attack in the shape of seven 4-inch BL guns on Vavasseur mountings, six Nordenfelt machine-guns, and two Gatling guns in the mizzen top. She was also fitted with two searchlights and provision was made for a pair of second-class torpedo-boats to be carried in crutches abreast the mizzen mast. A major advance in the provision of auxiliary machinery was the installation of an auxiliary boiler and 'horizontal fire-engine' to replace the inadequate hand fire-pumps formerly the only source of fire-main pressure when the main boilers were shut down. A contemporary report in *The Times* commented on these changes:

'In the case of the *Sultan* it has been determined to provide her with a couple of Mr. Wilde's electric lights for the purpose of detecting night attacks. . . . Two torpedo-boats will also be mounted above the upper deck. The *Sultan* will carry twelve of the improved Whitehead torpedoes and, as this is a novelty so far as she is concerned, the alterations and additions which have had to be made are very great. Five ports have had to be cut through her 9-inch armour on the main deck . . . The ventilation, always defective, has been improved by means of supplementary cowls and fans, and the weight of her projectiles has been increased.'

Re-commissioned on the 20th April 1882 under the command of Captain Sir W. J. Hunt-Grubbe, R.N., the *Sultan* returned to the Mediterranean and, on the 11th July, was present at the bombardment of Alexandria. There, under the provocation of a massacre of European residents by Arabi Pasha's nationalist rebels, the fleet of eight ironclads and six smaller craft attempted to destroy the fortifications of the town. The smoke and noise, however, appear to have had more effect than the actual bombardment since the shooting was inaccurate and the failure rate of the shells was high! On the other hand, the Egyptian reply from Forts Mex and Rasel Tin was at first surprisingly effective; the *Sultan* was hit several times, one shot passing clean through one of her funnels. Her damaged sheet anchor, another casualty resulting from the Egyptian gunfire, lies today outside the Administrative Block of the present H.M.S. *Sultan* at Gosport. Eventually, however, the weight of fire laid down by the British fleet told and Arabi Pasha retreated inland, to be defeated a few months later at Tel el Kebir by Sir Garnet Wolseley.

In due course, the *Sultan* returned home to Portsmouth and, under the command of Captain R. E. Tracey, R.N., was transferred to the Channel Fleet but she re-commissioned for further service in the Mediterranean in July 1885.

Not until 1889 did the *Sultan* again achieve public notice when, on the 6th March after recovering torpedoes, she struck an uncharted rock in the South Comino channel off the north western corner of Malta and ripped open her boiler room bilges. Attempts by the battleship *Temeraire* to tow her clear proved unsuccessful, and ultimately it was left to the Italian salvage firm of Baghino e Cia to refloat the vessel which was brought safely into Malta Dock-

yard on the 27th August 1889. There, temporary repairs were carried out and in the following December the *Sultan* left Grand Harbour under her own steam for Portsmouth where she was laid up to await a decision on her future. Already eighteen years old and completely outclassed by the turret ships of the *Collingwood* and later classes, it seemed unlikely that she would ever be refitted for further service.

In 1893, however, the unexpected decision was taken and, over the next three years, £200,000 was spent in 'modernizing' the ageing *Sultan*. Little could be done to up-date the central battery muzzle-loading main armament, but her anti-torpedo-boat defence was improved by installing four 4.7-inch quick-firing guns together with thirty-one smaller quick-firing and machine-guns. Her original horizontal trunk machinery was replaced by a new set of vertical triple-expansion engines which upset her stability, making necessary the addition of a waterline girdling of nine-inch thick teak to increase her beam and raise the metacentre. At the same time the heavy sailing rig was replaced by a pair of military masts, two tall oval-sectioned funnels and numerous cowl vents completed the modern illusion.

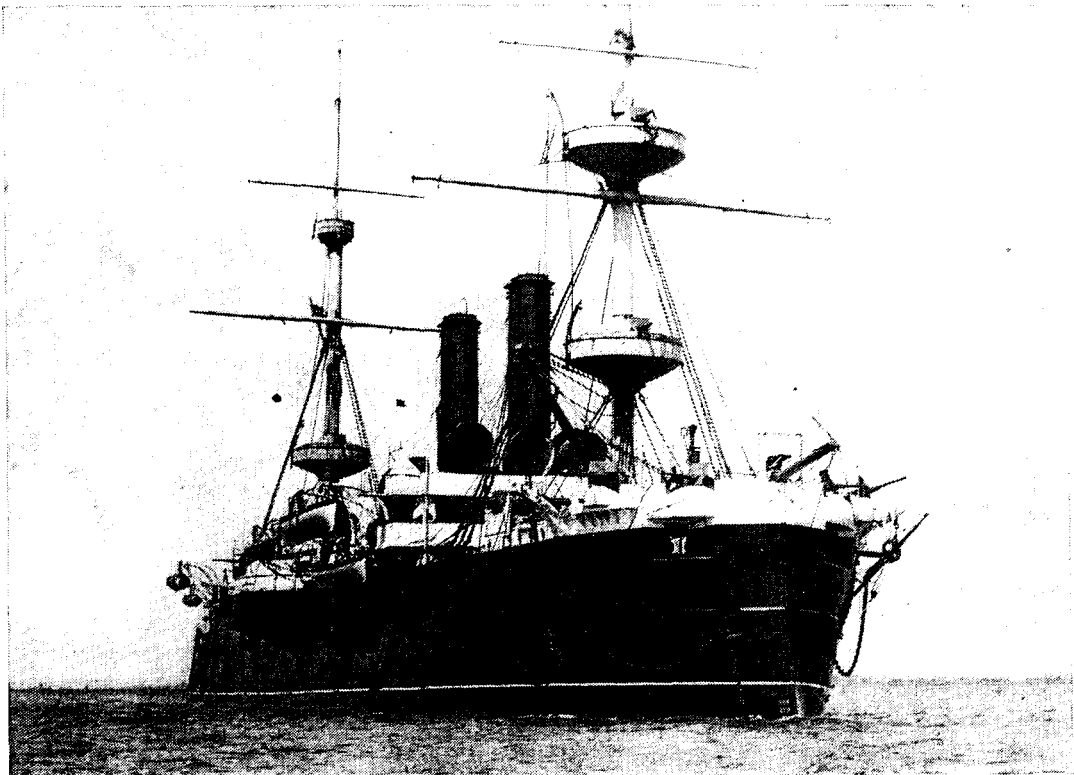


FIG. 3—THE THIRD 'SULTAN' AFTER RECONSTRUCTION ABOUT 1896

Reclassified as a third-class battleship, the *Sultan* commissioned for the annual manoeuvres of 1896 but thereafter she paid off and was laid up in reserve in the Portsmouth Steam Basin (now No. 3 Basin). With her long outdated muzzle-loading main battery the *Sultan*, along with several consorts, was deemed to be of 'second line' value to be commissioned for service in the event of the destruction of the more modern vessels of the Channel Fleet. In this capacity she was retained in the Navy List until 1905, by which time there was under construction nearby in Portsmouth Dockyard the first all-big-gun battleship, H.M.S. *Dreadnought*. Lord Fisher, the First Sea Lord, had in that year determined on the removal from the effective list of all obsolete warships of doubtful fighting value; a move calculated to save the nation some £845,000 per

annum in maintenance and repairs alone. Thus it appeared that the thirty-four year old *Sultan*, along with some thirteen other out-dated battleships was destined at last for the shipbreaker's yard.

Removal from the effective list was, however, by no means the end of the road for the *Sultan*, since in January 1906 she was hulked for service as part of the *Fisgard* Artificer Apprentices' training establishment and renamed *Fisgard IV*. Moored off Hardway, Gosport, alongside the former *Audacious (Fisgard)*, *Invincible (Fisgard II)* and *Hindustan (Fisgard III)*, the *Sultan* discharged this duty until December 1931 when the apprentices were moved ashore to new quarters (formerly a detention block) in *Fisgard Block* forming part of the Royal Naval Barracks, Chatham.

Renamed *Sultan* once again, the old hulk was moved back to the dockyard where, in a corner of No. 3 Basin, she took over the role of Mechanical Training Establishment. War came in 1939, however, and in the following year the *Sultan* became a depot and accommodation ship for locally based minesweepers in which capacity she was actively employed until 1945. The end came in April 1946 when the seventy-five year old hulk was sold for breaking up and, on the 8th October, she arrived alongside Beardmore's former shipyard at Dalmuir on the Clyde to be demolished by T. W. Ward & Co.

#### **The Fourth 'Sultan'**

Although the third *Sultan* reverted to her former name early in 1932 and retained it thereafter until she was sold for breaking up in 1946, she was not in fact re-commissioned as an H.M. ship. Thus when the name re-appeared in the Navy List early in 1940 it had been given to a new naval base then being built alongside the dockyard on Singapore island. Lost to the Japanese in February 1942, the Singapore base was re-commissioned under the same name in 1945 following the British re-occupation of the island. In the following year, however, it was decided that the name should be changed to H.M.S. *Terror* and as such the base remained in commission until the final run down of the British presence in Singapore in 1971.

After 1946, the name *Sultan* remained dormant for ten years until, in 1956, it was brought into use once again for the new Marine Engineering School which took over the former naval air station, H.M.S. *Siskin*, at Gosport. The history, development and training task of this establishment is outside the scope of this article, having been well recorded in this *Journal* in Vol. 9, No. 3; Vol. 14, No. 3; and Vol. 18, No. 2.

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